

# HANDBOOK

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# for ICE Fishermen

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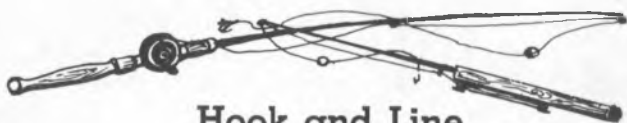
**W**hen winter's blast of freezing temperatures seals over Michigan's inland waters, thousands of hardy souls venture from their cozy confines to "break the ice" for another go-around at cold-weather fishing. Almost overnight, hundreds of little communities spring up on lakes and bays, populated by a breed of rugged sportsmen and women. Bone-chilling as the weather may be, these small settlements are hot spots for action as their residents spud holes in the ice, jiggle an ice fly for panfish, set tip-ups for walleye, pike or lake trout, toss a spear at a northern or muskie, etc. All this plus the camaraderie of the folks "next door" keeps calling fishermen back to their shanty towns until the spring thaw sets in. If you'd like to join the happy throng this winter but lack the know-how to get started, this folder should fill the gap. Its pages pass along the tried-and-proved savvy of fishermen around the state—their secrets to successful fishing, together with do-it-yourself ideas on rigging up angling extras, tips on dressing to keep warm, and ice safety suggestions. In short, everything is here to make your first outing the start of something big in outdoor fun. All you need is some fishing gear, some bait, a license . . . and beginner's luck. Here's hoping you have it.



MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

## Fishing Techniques

There are three basic ways to go about ice fishing—with hand lines, tip-ups, or spears. The first two are by far the most popular, probably because they are the simplest and can be used for taking just about every kind of fish on Michigan's legal catch list during the winter. Spear fishing is a more specialized sport which puts a premium on patience and accuracy. Generally, all three types of fishing are best from around dawn until mid-morning and again from late afternoon to sundown. However, spearing action usually holds up throughout the day. Early, late, or in between, get out whenever you have the chance. Another general thing to keep in mind is that fish become rather sluggish during the winter, and move around less than in the summer. So it stands to reason that the more holes you cut and try, the better your chances for locating fish. Let's look at each of these techniques to see what equipment you'll need and how to use it:

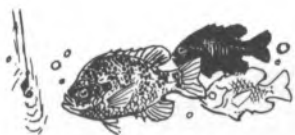


### Hook and Line

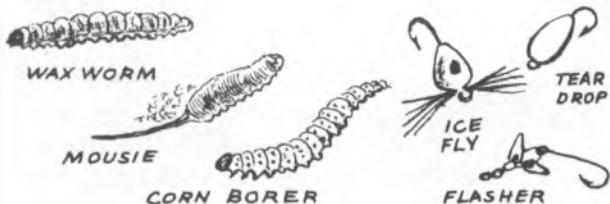
In getting geared up, you'll want a fiber-glass rod three to five feet long. A limber rod is usually preferred for catching panfish and trout and a stiff rod, which aids a firmer setting of the hook, for pike, walleye and muskie. If you're going after large trout or other big fish, a good free running reel, instead of the usual line-winding cleat, is a must. It will allow you to "play" your fish better. Also, when used without a bobber, this reel will let you change your fishing depth with the twist of a finger. Some fishermen substitute for the bobber by curling part of the line around their finger to get the "message" when they have a bite. Fishermen who don't care for reels keep their excess line from freezing and out of the way by winding it around two L-screws which are placed about 12 inches apart on the wooden handles of their rods. Choice in the strength of lines also varies, with not over four-pound test recommended for best action on bluegills, other panfish, brown and rainbow trout. Some sportsmen who are angling specifically for pike or muskies, have lines that go as high as 8-12 pound test. Neglecting to use light lines is probably the most frequent mistake of unsuccessful fishermen. Occasionally, fish will

break the lighter line, but with some finesse, you can land most fish and are certain to have more bites. One thing ice fishermen are unanimous about is that the line should be transparent monofilament. When it comes to the bobber, the smaller the better, as long as it's big enough to stay afloat. Fish generally don't bite as eagerly in the winter as during the summer. Thus, the float buoyance and lure weight should be balanced so the slightest nibble will sink the bobber and offer minimum resistance to the fish. If the float is too buoyant, fish often spit out the bait. Assuming for the moment that you've picked the right baits and hooks, the strategy in hand line fishing is pretty simple. You just "bob" or "jig" your line with a short up-and-down motion to attract fish to your bait. Stop every couple of minutes. This will enable you to feel a bite, and give fish a better crack at your offerings.

## Bluegills

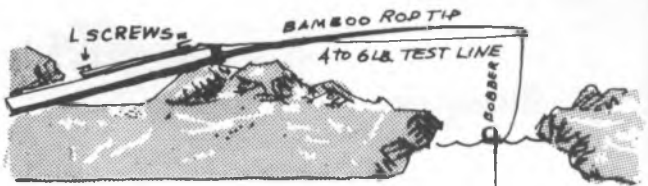


By and large, you'll find these fish in the same areas during winter as they are in summer—over weedy mud flats and at inlets and outlets. Early in the ice season fish near bottom in 10-20 feet, generally late afternoon. Jig your line about once a minute and every few minutes, raise your rod some four feet and let the bait settle again. If nothing happens in 20-30 minutes, make another hole ten feet or more from where you've been fishing. After a month of ice and snow cover, bluegills may start swimming higher off bottom and they become increasingly sensitive about biting. Your success then may depend on locating the fish at higher depths, and going to smaller lures and a lighter monofilament line. A good combination is: a small ice fly, a tear drop or small flasher blade with a grub or wiggler on it. The "grubs" sold at the bait stores are usually mousies, wax worms or corn borers—they all are good. Since winter bluegill lures all have weight, no extra shot is advisable.

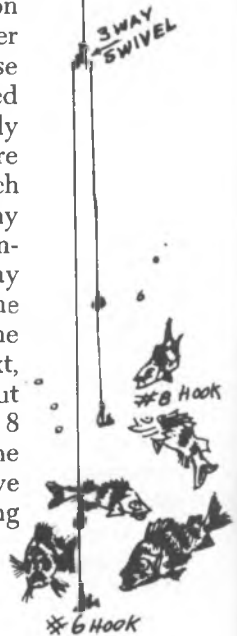


## Perch

Look for these fish in the same haunts favored by bluegills. Halfway through the winter in deep lakes, they are generally found in the deeper pockets during mid-day and toward shoals in early morning and evening. Most often, perch will be six inches to two feet off the bottom. If the barometer is dropping, go all the way down with your bait. Sometimes, you have to move it four to six feet off the bottom to get action. Probably the best hook-ups for perch are Russian spoons baited with perch eyes or minnows, a plain hook baited with a wiggler, or one of the numerous commercially made ice spoons used for bluegills with a grub on the hook portion. It is common in Great Lakes waters especially to use a two-dropper hook setup with a heavy dipsey (bell) sinker at the terminal end. Bait stores in likely areas will have these dropper



rigs on sale. Perch move in schools so one should catch them fast when they're with you as they may soon move on. Plain brass and silver spoons may also be used with these or other baits already mentioned for bluegills which work equally well on perch. Other good bets are mousies, flicker spinners, French spinners, red yarn, and even a shiny bare hook. As an added action-getter place a three or one-way swivel about three feet above the end of your main 4-6 pound test line and attach a drop line to it. Next, put a rather heavy sinker about eight inches above a No. 6 or 8 hook on the main line. Do the same to the drop line and you'll have doubled your chances for making catches.



## Walleyes

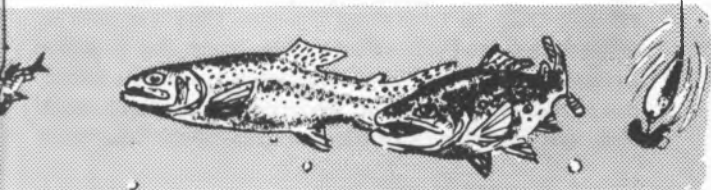
Take what has just been said about perch locations and put down a "ditto" on your checklist for walleye. Here again, jigging is very effective, using

a 6-8 pound test line. Russian spoons, a Swedish pimple and Rapala spoons baited with a minnow are examples of proven jigging combinations. Going a bit into detail perhaps, it's a good practice to let your baited spoon hit the lake bottom to disturb the sand or mud and get the attention of fish. Another way of attracting walleyes is to "chum" the fishing hole with wigglers.



## Brown and Rainbow Trout

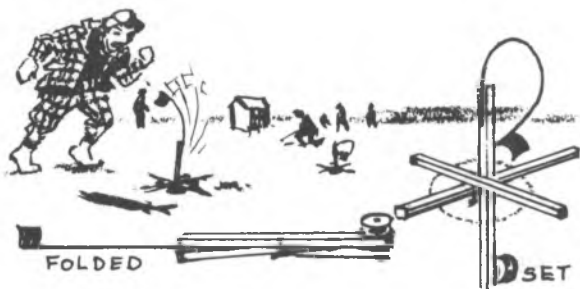
These two fish are newcomers to Michigan's lineup of ice fishing attractions. During December, January, and February, they are fair catches in about 250 lakes specially designated in recent years by the Conservation Department. Lists of these waters are available free from the Department's district headquarters or its Publications Room in Lansing. Happily for most ice fishermen, the special season doesn't require a lot of new equipment. In fact, ice fishing tackle for bluegills and perch serve nicely for most trout fishing. As in panfishing, a limber rod is used to lessen the chance of breaking the line or tearing the hook from the fish. The line should be monofilament nylon of about two pound test, same as preferred for taking panfish. Lures are as variable as the angler, but here again there is quite an overlap with panfishing. Trout will hit on most natural baits: corn borer, wigglers, minnows, crayfish, salmon eggs, etc. Often times, these baits are more effective when used with bright ice flies, small spoons, or spinner attracters in sizes 8 to 12. Mostly, they should be offered within six feet of the bottom. In lakes with inlets or outlets that produce a current, these fish seem to concentrate in the paths of the current. Generally, though, they don't concentrate and you'll have to move around to find them. In some lakes, most trout are in shallow water, but in others they seem to be in deeper waters, up to 30 feet or so. When fishing over shallow water, stay well back from the hole and move as little as possible or you're apt to scare the fish away. Bob the bait a lot in the water, but let it rest for a few seconds. Although trout are attracted by this movement, they usually



don't take the bait until it is nearly motionless. If you don't get a bite in 15 minutes, move on and make a new hole. Another approach to catching whitefish as well as trout calls for a combination of hand line and tip-up fishing in two holes about 10 feet apart. In one, use a hand line with a large, baited flashing spoon as the come-on. Place a tip-up in the other hole, baiting it with a small minnow about one foot from the bottom. Put a buck-shot sinker on a plain monofilament line about a foot above the minnow. Idea of this two-way tactic is that these fish will often go after a minnow on a still line when they're not hitting on a moving lure. Chances for success go up when the fishing holes are liberally sprinkled with oatmeal to draw in the fish. One last word about winter trout fishing: It's most productive just after the ice forms and progressively slacks off later in the season.

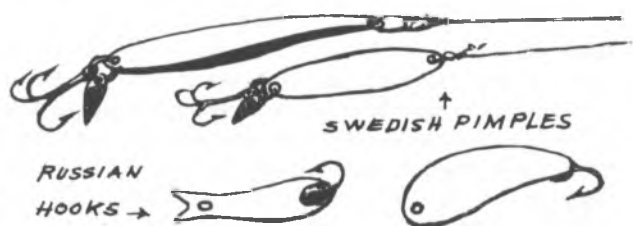
## Lake Trout

For these deep-water rovers, pick out a spot over 50 feet deep. The bait—cut sucker, a minnow, an artificial red or yellow fly, or a Swedish pimple—is fished about 12 inches off bottom, and bobbed just enough to make it flutter and enable the fisherman to feel if a trout is mouthing his offerings. Sometimes, lakers will strike hard enough to hook themselves, but mostly they mouth the bait, and the beginner has trouble detecting it. More often than not, the strike is very soft, and more sensed than felt.



These devices, equipped with reels and flags, are used mostly for larger fish; northern pike, wall-eyes, muskies, and lake trout. They are cheap to buy or easy to make. Most of those on the market are made to fold up for compact handling. There's no big trick to operating tip-ups; they are merely baited and set out. When a fish bites, the flag flies up and the fun begins. The rest is up to the fisherman and he goes to it by giving his line a solid jerk, setting the hook in the fish. Next, he pulls

the line in rapidly, hand over hand. When he has the fish near the hole, it's time to play it careful. In their haste, anglers most frequently lose their catches at this point by trying to get the fish on the ice before it is ready. Be prepared on the violent surges to let the line slip through your fingers—but always with some tension. As you may have guessed, tip-ups are especially nice to have in colder weather when it's hard to stand guard over fishing holes for a long period of time. Once they are set out, the fisherman can retire to a warm shanty and wait for the action to pop. Or, for those who like variety in their sport, tip-ups give them a chance to also try their luck at hand line fishing.



## Northern Pike

Favorite winter haunts of these fish are along drop-offs in and near weed beds and brush shelters in waters 3-12 feet deep. Pike baits—large minnows, 4-5 inch suckers, smelt or herring—normally get best results when they are 1-4 feet off bottom. During March, it sometimes pays to offer one bait at this depth and another one about four feet under the ice. Try the same bait depths for wall-eyes and lake trout. Pike are fierce fighters, so use a strong monofilament line (up to 20-pound test) and a wire or heavy gut leader. The leader should be weighted with two No. 4 split shot and feature a large treble hook (1/0 or 2/0). When pike grab the bait, they usually make a run, rest, and then run again. As soon as they start the second run, set the hook with a solid jerk and then pull the line in rapidly, hand over hand. Take that hook out of the landed fish with a pair of pliers or be prepared for many tooth lacerations!

## Walleyes

As in hand line fishing, the places to be are over reefs and the edges of shoals where the water is 15-30 feet deep. For bait, take a 2-3 inch live minnow and hook it just behind the dorsal fin so it

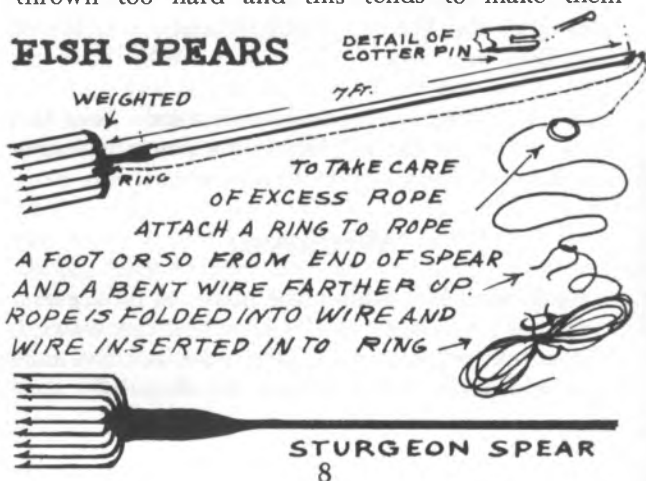
will be free to swim. The livelier the bait, the better. Use light tackle, about a six-pound test leader, and small hooks. Dusk hours or cloudy days are usually best.

## Lake Trout

It's been mentioned earlier, but this where-to-tip deserves repeating: Do your fishing in the deeper parts of lakes. And be sure you have enough line. No less than 100 yards is suggested because these fish may run out that much before they are actually hooked. A 4-6 pound test line will do the job. The same goes for hooks in the No. 6 to 10 range. Since monofilament of long length has a tendency to twist, many experts tie in a small swivel every 50 feet or so. Treble hooks in the Nos. 10 and 12 sizes work well, but any larger than these should be single pointed. Place a very small split-shot two feet above the hook and set your bait, a 2-4 inch live shiner or smelt just off bottom or a dead smelt or herring on the bottom of the lake. Some anglers successfully use a three-way swivel 10 feet up the line with a dropper hook baited with a live minnow.

## Spearing

An absolute "must" here is a good dark shanty which eliminates the chance of fish seeing you and being spooked. If you have a stove, make sure that the glow from it is blocked. The shanty itself should be sturdily built so the sound from your movements inside will not travel through the ice. As for the fisherman, he should wear dark clothes and gloves so he won't tip himself off to his underwater targets. For accuracy's sake, use a spear that is weighted. Those that aren't have to be thrown too hard and this tends to make them





angle off course. Overall weight of the spear depends upon the fisherman's tastes and the kind of fish he's going after. The spear used on whopping-sized sturgeon may weigh as much as 15-18 pounds. Whatever the weight, the spear you'll want will have seven to nine strong tines and about a seven-foot handle with a rope attached so you won't lose it. In attaching the rope, here's a little trick which sometimes may be the difference between landing a fish and losing it. Run your rope through a cotterpin on the spear's handle down to the tines where it is tied fast or secured with a metal ring. When you hit the mark and start to haul the fish in, a slight jerk pulls the cotterpin out and lets you lift the spear with the tines up. If the fish is not speared very well, this helps to keep it on the tines instead of giving it a chance to work free. Getting back to the preliminaries, the element of surprise can't be overstressed as a key to successful spear fishing. So, in getting poised for action, lower your spear into the water before you release it. Otherwise, it will make a loud plunging sound when it hits the water, and alert the fish in time to let it dart away to safety.



## **Pike and Muskie**

As an important starter, seek out an area where the water is about eight feet deep. Since a good deal of sharpshooting for these fish is done in murky water, it's not a bad idea to drop tinfoil, egg shells, or thin slices of potato into your spearing hole. These objects will settle on the bottom to provide a light background which will make it easier to see fish. The next thing to do is run your bait or decoy down about three feet below the ice or farther, depending upon how clear the water is. Live one-pound suckers, 6-8 inch perch, and large golden shiners (minnows) seem to attract pike and muskies most consistently. Red and white decoys are also good fish teasers. Some spearing enthusiasts use a large pearl button for this and have more luck with it than the conventional fish-shaped wooden decoy.

## **Sturgeon**

Spearing for these long-lived lunkers is a rare sport limited to the month of February and centered exclusively on inland waters in the Cheboygan and

Indian River chain of lakes—Black, Burt, and Mullett. It is done from a shanty over a marl bottom, generally in water 10-20 feet deep. Slow-moving metal and wooden decoys are used to catch the sturgeon's curiosity.



## Getting Started On The Ice

Naturally, before you can test any of the things we've been talking about, there is the small matter of making a hole in the ice. Many veteran fishermen say the Swedish type auger can't be beat for this, especially when the ice is 12 inches thick or more. Others swear by their trusty spuds, and some favor axes. It's your choice. Of course, the auger isn't designed for the type of hole that spear fishermen need. Whatever tool you pick, keep it sharp or by the time the hole is made, you may be too tuckered to enjoy your fishing. With a spud, attach a rope to its handle and wrap the loose end around your arm or wrist so the spud won't be lost when you make that first jab through the ice. In chopping or spudding that hole, taper it like an inverted funnel so the bottom side is larger than the top. Many a big fish has been lost because the hole was too small on the bottom. Remember, too, that a hole with sharp or jagged edges may cut your line. Too large a hole may later endanger a life; 8-10 inches is ample.

## De-Icing Ideas

It's a real nuisance and kill-joy to have ice keep forming in your fishing hole. To avoid this, add a small amount of anti-freeze, common salt, glycerin, or vegetable oil to the water. When the weather isn't too cold, some fishermen find it works to sprinkle graphite powder on the water to keep it free of ice. Also, you can build a small mound of snow around the windward side of the hole and use a small skimmer to scoop away slush from time to time. To prevent snow from filling holes, take a small cardboard box and tear off the top and one side. Then place it over the hole bottom up so your line is protected from the three worst sides and from above. The one open side will let

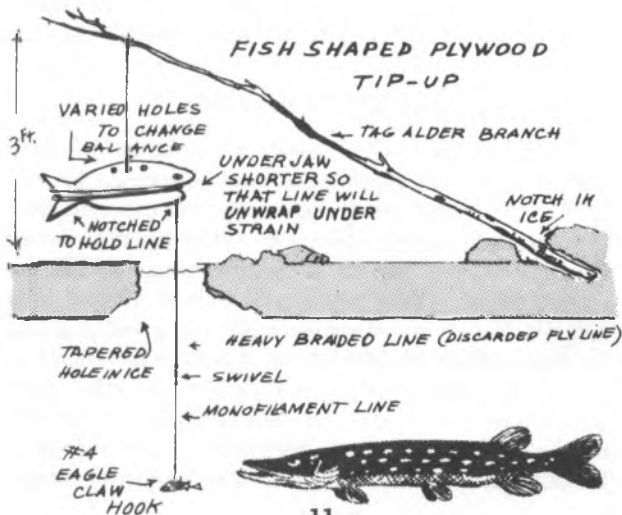
you watch the bobber for action. For even better protection against freezing wind and drifting snow, you can use a box enclosed on all sides except the bottom. On the top, punch a very small hole and run through a light line, with the bobber set to float in the water. Outside the box, this line is extended some 30 feet and another bobber is attached to it so you know when there is a bite. Some fishermen actually do the opposite of all this. As a smart bit of strategy when angling for perch and walleyes in very shallow water, they place snow in the hole to shield off light which often spooks the fish.

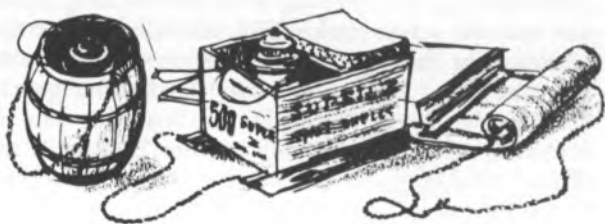
## Bait Savers

There are several ways to lick the problem of having minnows freeze. One is to place them in a styrofoam bucket; as an added measure, the bucket can be painted black to absorb the sun's rays. Another suggestion is to keep minnows under the ice in a perforated can which allows water to flow through it. Or, you can tuck bait inside your clothing where it will stay warm. Still another way is to pack snow around the minnow bucket as insulation.

## Paddle-Type Tip-Up

For all do-it-yourselfers, an easy project to start on is the paddle-type tip-up, one of the more popular homemade devices. This illustration tells better than a lot of words on how to set up this fish-catcher. Sportsmen, by and large, get a special kick out of using equipment they've made with their own hands. It blends a touch of creativeness with their rugged outdoor skills.



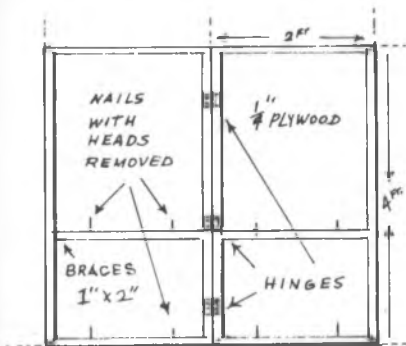


## Equipment Carriers

When it comes to lugging your gear, a nail keg or old wooden shell box make handy items and both of them are practically ready-made for what the fisherman has in mind. Just add a rope handle to the keg and you have a compact carry-all—and an emergency life preserver. Use a gas lantern inside the keg for heat. With the shell box, add a piece of wood to cover half of the open side, leaving enough room to pull out gear which is stashed inside. On the top of the box, cut a small notch for poles to stick through and tack on a piece of foam rubber to make sitting more comfortable. Sleds and cut-off skis are often rigged with boxes so they double as seats and for carrying gear. Usually, a gas lantern is placed inside the box and lit to keep the angler warm. Going a step further, you can convert a toboggan into a combination equipment-carrier and windbreak. This is done by fixing a long box on the toboggan with a hinged topside. Pins are placed on the top of the box and the bottom of the toboggan. These hold the top completely open when the toboggan is tipped on its side to form the other part of the windbreak. A regular pop case can be carried in the box and used as a seat and container for fish.

## Windbreakers

Shanties are nice to have on those raw, windy days but if you don't own one, there are several fairly simple and inexpensive rigs you can make for protection from the elements. One of these is the familiar lean-to which is generally made like an Indian tepee. Three round poles, about six feet long and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches in circumference, are used. Canvas or some other windbreaking material is tacked to them. At each end of the poles are spike nails which are driven into the ice to hold the lean-to in place. Another idea is to make a portable wind-break with a pair of 2 x 4 foot sheets of one-quarter



## PLYWOOD WINDBREAKER

inch plywood which are hinged together. The whole thing folds up and, by adding runners on one side, can be used as a sled. Slightly below the middle and at the bottom of the sheets, 1 x 2 inch horizontal braces are put in place, each having four nails which are driven in vertically. The nails are "de-headed" so they will slip through positioned holes in two triangular boards which serve as a portable seat and floor. When this windbreak is not being used, the seat and floor are stored inside the two folded sheets.

## Ice Safety

Safe ice fishing begins by sizing up conditions on your lake before carting shanties and other paraphernalia onto the ice. A good place to start checking lakes is right around the shore. If shoreline ice is squashy or broken up, it's a pretty good bet that the lake is still not safe. It pays to know your lake—its springs and other features which may pose dangers. Spring-fed lakes generally have some thin patches of ice throughout the winter, especially around their inlets and outlets. Stay clear of dark spots in the ice or places where the snow looks discolored. You can't always tell the strength of ice simply by its look, its thickness, the temperature or whether or not it is covered with snow. However, new ice is generally much stronger than old ice; a couple of inches of new clear ice may be strong enough to support you while a foot of old, air-bubbled ice will not. Driving cars on ice can

be downright dangerous at any time. If you insist, leave your safety belts unbuckled, keep the car windows down, and be ready to bail out. Don't park your car in one spot for a long period because this tends to weaken the ice. Also, cars should not be parked close together. When fishing from a shanty, be sure of proper venting, whether it is a simple hole in the roof or a regular stove pipe. A real danger exists for fishermen who use small burners, designed primarily for cooking, which lack some type of venting for escaping fumes.



## Keep-Warm Ideas

All other plans and preparations—no matter how well laid out—can go for naught unless the fisherman dresses for the weather. The important thing is not the amount but, rather, the choice of clothing you wear. Instead of wearing heavy, bulky garments, slip into several thin layers of loose clothing which will let you adjust to the weather. On some sunny days, you may actually get too warm and need to peel off a few of those cold-weather duds. Getting down more specifically to the “bare” facts, your feet are the two most important things to keep warm. What to wear? A large number of ice fishermen rate insulated, waterproof boots, preferably the Korean kind, as No. 1. Felt shoes inside rubbers also make good footwear. With them, wear one



pair of light socks and a pair of medium-heavy wool socks. Your feet also will stay warm if you put on a light pair of wool socks under and over wool slippers and top this off with four-buckle arctics. Some type of windbreaker is a must as an outer garment, with the parka being a strong favorite because of its hood. What goes underneath can vary. One good combination includes thermal underwear, wool shirt and pants, and insulated coveralls. For the hands, wear plastic gloves to keep dry. If you don't be sure to carry a spare pair of gloves or mittens; for some reason, the first pair always seems to get wet. Hand warmers are high on the fisherman's list, as are gas lanterns and small burners (oil and charcoal). One more word about keeping warm; most fishermen wouldn't dream of heading onto the ice without their thermos bottle of hot coffee or tea.



## Outdoor Etiquette

Being a good fisherman is more than a matter of catching a lot of fish. Fellow sportsmen will also rate you by a number of other things, including the way your fishing area looks. Keep it neat. Remember, cans and bottles left on the ice are washed upon lake shores during spring breakup, inviting accidents for summer bathers and causing many clean-up chores. When abandoning your fishing hole, give the other guy a break by marking it with a tree branch, sticks, or a chunk of ice. Successful fishermen always seem to draw a crowd and while there is no law against going where the action is, don't crowd out the fellow who found the hot spot in the first place.

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